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EQUALITY FOR WOMEN: PAST AND PRESENT
EFFORTS TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S STATUS

Maureen Baker

Political and Social Affairs Division
Research Branch
Ottawa

January 1985



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EQUALITY FOR WOMEN: PAST AND PRESENT
EFFORTS TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S STATUS

Maureen Baker

Political and Social Affairs Division
Research Branch
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January 1985

BACKGROUND PAPER FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS

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Cat. No. YM32-2/115E

ISBN 0-660-12408-4

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EQUALITY FOR WOMEN:
PAST AND PRESENT EFFORTS TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S STATUS

INTRODUCTION: THE GROWING POLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN

The increasing political importance of women voters was particularly evident in the 1984 federal election when the leaders of the three main political parties debated "women's issues" on public television. Although some people disputed that the issues were exclusively of concern to women, the very fact that political leaders spoke of equal pay for work of equal value, day care, affirmative action and the poverty of elderly women was seen by members of the women's movement as a small victory.

In the past century, there have been substantial legal changes in the status of women. Yet until the last decade, politics and board rooms remained bastions of male supremacy. Perhaps the most significant impetus to women's improved status has been their increased participation in the labour force. Working for pay has given women new political power and necessitated other changes in the age-old assumptions about women's "role". With their own money, women have become more visible consumers of automobiles, business expenses, houses and a series of other items. They can better afford to leave husbands with whom they are not happy. They can return to school and use their increased education to find a higher paying or more satisfying job. With education and greater financial independence women have become more vocal about equality in other aspects of their lives.

In this paper, we will compare the struggle for equality of the 19th century women's movement with that of the last two decades, searching for social and economic factors which have strengthened women's quest for equality.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A. Defining "Feminism"

"Feminism" is an ideology which promotes the notion that women should have equal legal, educational and occupational opportunities to men, that women's contribution to public life has historically been downplayed, and that the status of women should be raised. If we accept this definition, we could argue that feminism as an ideology has existed for perhaps thousands of years. But at certain times in history, women (and some men) have actively tried to change their society to promote feminist goals through government lobbies, demonstrations, public lectures, consciousness-raising groups and publications. "The Women's Movement" has never really been a unified social movement, but rather a collection of groups usually with similar goals but often with different strategies and priorities. Sometimes these groups have worked in tandem, and sometimes at cross-purposes.

There has always been a split in the women's movement between "liberal feminists" who have focused on reforming the existing system so that women can gain equality, and "socialist feminists" who emphasized the necessity to abolish inequalities based on class along with those based on gender. In this paper we will refer to both types of groups, yet concentrate on liberal feminism which has had more impact on government legislation and policy changes and has stressed equality with men. The socialist feminists have seen the transformation of society as more significant than mere equality.⁽¹⁾

In certain periods of history there has been greater cooperation among women's groups as they were unified over specific social and political issues. For example, in Canada, women's groups were united over the suffrage controversy, especially from 1913 to 1917. In 1967-68, various groups cooperated to liberalize the abortion laws. And in recent years

(1) Varda Burstyn, "The Age of Women's Liberation," Canadian Dimension, October/November 1984, 18:21-26.

years many groups have worked together on the world peace and international disarmament issue.

B. Membership in Feminist Groups

Those who joined feminist groups have largely been middle class women, who had the leisure, the verbal skills to articulate their priorities and access to the press. Males affiliated with these women have often been peripherally involved as well, with greater involvement in the 19th than in the 20th century. Members of the women's movement have also been active in other social reform or radical movements, such as temperance, abolition of slavery, trade unionism, anti-war protests, civil rights and socialism. In fact the impetus for involvement in feminism was sometimes a reaction against an experience in another social movement. For example, after helping black American men get the vote in the 1870s, American, British and Canadian women expected the Blacks to help women to win the vote. When it became apparent that the men had no such intentions, the women's suffrage movement became more determined and gathered strength.

C. Issues and Priorities

Since the 1790s, feminist writings have expressed concern about women's lack of public participation, legal rights and education and the double standard of sexual morality. Both the French Revolution and the American Revolution inspired women and men, who applied the demands for equality to women. But it was the influx of working class women into the mines and factories of England that led to a widespread public debate about the conditions of work and their potential impact on women's reproduction, the decline of the family, sexual harassment in the factory, increased access to higher education and political office and the role of women in general.

Once women began to work in factories, the demand for their labour dramatically increased in other areas of work. The expansion of education in the 1840s and 1850s led to an influx of women teachers, who in

most cases were paid about half the wage of a man because "men supported families" and had teacher's training in "normal school". When women tried to enrol in Canadian teachers' colleges, they met with strong opposition until 1849 when the first woman enrolled in a college in New Brunswick. The fight for co-education at the post-secondary level was an international struggle which continued for over 30 years in Canada. While Mount Allison University in New Brunswick admitted women in 1858,(1) the more prestigious universities like the University of Toronto kept women out until 1884 for fear of "lowering their standards". Generally, co-education was resisted by many universities until it was proven financially necessary. The need for more students (and therefore more revenue) was often the major motive in allowing women to enter universities, rather than any idea of social justice. Acceptance into professional schools and associations was most difficult for women and was not accomplished in some cases until the 20th century.(2)

Once women were working for pay, controversy arose about the fact that they had no legal rights to keep and administer their own money or to own property. These matters were in the hands of a woman's husband, and put her in a similar position to minor children. The English Married Women's Property Act of 1870 became the impetus for similar laws in the Canadian provinces. These new laws gave married women the right to maintain property they owned prior to their marriage and administer their own finances and property during marriage. Ontario was the first province to legislate this change in 1872.

Leaders of the 19th century movement were also concerned with protective legislation, minimum wages and women and children's working conditions. Dress reform was also an issue, since women's long dresses were cumbersome in some factory jobs and in the new fad of the 1890s -- cycling.

(1) Margaret E. MacLellan, "The History of Women's Rights in Canada," in Cultural Tradition and Political History of Women in Canada, Studies of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, #8, Ottawa, 1971, p. 6.

(2) Ibid., p. 8-12.

The right to use birth control was advocated by Margaret Sanger but little progress was made on this issue until the next century. But generally, women were rebelling against the 'uselessness' of the female role.(1)

D. Focusing on Voting Rights

Despite interest in improving women's status in a number of areas, leaders began to focus on the right to vote or women's suffrage as a key issue in improving their lives. They felt that if women could vote and hold public office, women's different priorities would change politics. They would abolish war and human suffering since women were assumed to be spiritually and morally superior to men.

The anti-suffrage lobby was worried about the alliance between members of the women's movement and temperance groups. But they also felt that the husband, as head of the household, voted on behalf of his wife and she therefore had no need for a separate vote. Granting voting rights to women might "destroy the harmony of the home" and lead to a "decline in the birthrate". Since the family was seen as the basic unit of society, anything which threatened the institution was seen as a problem.

In Britain, the lobby for women's suffrage became very political and controversial from around 1905 to 1914 with the demonstrations and imprisonment of the Pankhurst sisters and other members of the Women's Social and Political Union. But in Canada, the movement was less oriented to public demonstrations. The first suffrage group, founded in 1876, actually called itself the Toronto Women's Literary Club. By 1883 they had become bolder, and renamed themselves the Toronto Women's Suffrage Association. The movement was founded by Emily Howard Stowe, who fought long and hard with the medical association to become Canada's first female doctor. By the turn of the century, there were suffrage groups all across the country, with headquarters in Toronto.(2) Nellie McClung from Manitoba

(1) Linda Kealey (ed.), A Not Unreasonable Claim, Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s, Toronto, Women's Press, 1979, p. 15.

(2) M. Nunes and D. White, The Lace Ghetto, Toronto, New Press, 1973, p. 29-30.

was also a prominent leader in the fight for suffrage, using tactics such as an all-female mock parliament in 1896, lecture tours and publications. The suffragists were supported by western farmers' organizations, organized labour in British Columbia, a substantial number of Protestant clergy, influential sectors of the press, and national women's groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the National Council of Women established in 1893 and the Women's Institutes.⁽¹⁾ However, the counter lobby was also very strong, strengthened by the brewers and distillers of alcoholic beverages, prominent businessmen and many women.

It was not until 1917 that women could vote in Canadian federal elections (although Australian women could vote in 1900 and New Zealanders as early as 1893). In Canada, the Conservative government of Robert Borden wanted to pass a bill on conscription during the war. He assumed that women who were nurses overseas would support the bill, as would women whose husbands and sons were fighting. So he extended the vote to these women in 1917 (and his bill was passed). The next year in 1918, it was a logical step to extend the vote to all women 21 and over. American women won the right to vote in 1919 and British women in 1921. Women in the Canadian provinces received the vote as early as 1916 (in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta) and as late as 1940 in Quebec.⁽²⁾

E. After the Vote

The first woman was elected to the House of Commons in 1921 (Agnes Macphail), but it was 14 years before the next woman won a federal election.⁽³⁾ However, there were a number of women elected to the provincial legislatures but none appointed to the Senate until a lengthy court case (initiated by five Alberta women) determined whether or not women

(1) McLellan, p. 15.

(2) Report of Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, Ottawa, 1970, p. 338.

(3) Jean Cochrane, Women in Canadian Life - Politics, Toronto, Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1977, p. 10.

were "legal persons". After the decision was appealed by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in 1929, women were declared eligible to sit in the Senate. Cairine Wilson was then appointed in 1930.(1)

Some major changes in social legislation occurred during the 1920s which could have been attributed to women voters or Members of Parliament or may have just been a sign of the times. For example, by 1928, most provinces had passed legislation on mothers' allowances, maintenance for deserted wives, protection of children and equal guardianship of children by both parents. At the federal level, divorce law was equalized for the sexes and old age pensions were introduced.(2)

From 1920 until the 1970s, the proportion of women MPs did not rise above 1% and the influence of women voters did not apparently bring about dramatic changes in political issues. Yet women made inroads into other areas during the 1920s. By the 1930s more women were enrolled in university undergraduate programs than in the early 1950s. And a greater proportion of postgraduate students were female during the 1920s than throughout the next four decades.(3) Loss of men's lives after World War I opened new job vacancies and others were created through an expansion of manufacturing and the service sectors. But women's organizations after the 1930s became more concerned with social service than the more radical issues they had been involved in during the 1880s. The alignment between the women's movement and labour declined as the concerns of women became more "middle class" and oriented towards the extension of women's maternal role ("maternal feminism").

During the 1930s, economic hard times led to legislation keeping married women out of government jobs. Politically, there was little agitation for women's rights as many people were more concerned about the rising unemployment and increasing "bread lines". The Great Depression focused on male unemployment and women were expected to run the household,

(1) Royal Commission (1970), p. 340.

(2) Ibid., p. 338.

(3) Ibid., p. 168.

care for dependent relatives and try to earn some money on the side to assist the male breadwinners.

RECENT CHANGES IN WOMEN'S RIGHTS

A. Increasing Labour Force Participation

During the Second World War, women again entered the labour force in increasing numbers to work in offices, munitions factories, and generally to fill jobs left vacant by men who went to fight overseas. The provision of day nurseries was an indication of strong government encouragement for women to work outside the home. Yet when the war ended in 1945, day care services were cut back and returning soldiers expected their jobs back. Social pressure forced many women back into the home. The 1950s became known as "the postwar baby boom", a time of high marriage rates, high birthrates and relatively low participation of women in public life. Yet the proportion of married women in the workforce actually increased from 4.5% in 1941 to 11.2% in 1951 to 20.8% in 1961.⁽¹⁾ Expansion of the service and industrial sectors of the economy created new jobs and the demand for labour increased. Despite the ideology which supported mother at home caring for the children, more working class wives entered the labour force through financial need due to inflation.

B. The Revitalization of Feminism .

It was not until the 1960s that the women's movement was revitalized. Simone de Beauvoir had published The Second Sex in 1949, but her ideas had influenced few North Americans. But with the expansion of colleges and universities in Canada and the United States, an increasing number of women entered post-secondary institutions and began to broaden their aspirations for intellectual stimulation and consequently for paid

(1) Pat and Hugh Armstrong, The Double Ghetto, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1978, p. 52.

employment. Rising expectations had also been created among American Blacks and Native groups in both Canada and the U.S. With the expansion of the economy, minority groups and women began to expect a greater share of the jobs and rewards of society. Trade unionism, civil rights, "red power", socialism and protests against U.S. involvement in Vietnam all formed the context for the renewal of activism for women. Breakaway groups of women from the "new left" formed the "women's liberation movement" in the U.S. and Canada and these small leaderless "consciousness-raising" groups spread quickly throughout North America. Reform-oriented lobby groups were formed in many countries. One of the best known was Betty Friedan's National Organization of Women (NOW), formed in 1966 after dissatisfaction with the results of President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women in 1961.⁽¹⁾ Friedan's book The Feminine Mystique (1963) became a best seller because it so clearly identified the "problem with no name" for so many American women who were excluded from meaningful social and political participation.

C. The Canadian Movement

In Canada, the Committee for the Equality for Women was formed in 1966 by Laura Sabia, then president of the Canadian Federation of University Women. This collection of women's groups lobbied for a Royal Commission on the Status of Women. With the help of the Secretary of State, Judy La Marsh, the Commission was established in February 1967 and strengthened many existing women's groups.⁽²⁾ The report was published three years later.

In 1972, a conference to follow up the report gave birth to a new women's group called the National Action Committee. As an umbrella group for 170 women's organizations across the country, it has formed an

(1) Jo Freeman (ed.), Women: A Feminist Perspective, Mayfield Publishing, 1975, p. 449.

(2) S.J. Wilson, Women, the Family and the Economy, Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1982, p. 127.

important pressure group.⁽¹⁾ But smaller and more radical groups also arose out of the Student Union for Peace Action. The Voice of Women, an organization promoting world peace, has also been influential. Other feminists have been involved in organizing women's centres, rape crisis centres, transition houses for battered wives and other specialized counselling services for women. The Women's Press in Toronto and women's bookstores across the country have assisted in the transmission of feminist ideas, but also served as a meeting place for like-minded women.

In the 1970s the Canadian and provincial governments set up provincial and federal Advisory Councils on the Status of Women for policy advice, research and publicity on "women's issues." The establishment of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW) in 1973 was one of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. Status of Women Canada and the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labour were established to initiate and implement government policy related to women. But critics of the advisory councils have suggested that they are really diversionary tactics to make it appear as though the government is doing something to improve the status of women. While the publications of the CACSW are widely distributed to the public, to schools and universities, some say they are preaching to the converted. Costly public relations work and more meetings than actual changes have been the problems with the councils, as well as the careful avoidance of anything approaching socialist feminism. Yet the government departments and councils have served an education function and the councils have successfully lobbied the government to take women's situation more seriously.

The Feminist Party of Canada has also been a direct product of the women's movement. Formed in 1979 by a group of women who had been active in NAC and other women's groups, the party is meant to give a political voice to the feminist perspective. Disappointed with women's inroads into the three major political parties, these women assumed that only by creating a new political party could women become more active, gain experience in political office and voice their feminist views without

(1) Ibid., p. 127.

jeopardizing party policy. Although a party with such specialized interests can never hope to win an election, it can provide a strong voice for feminist concerns to Parliament.

D. The Peace Movement

Women's groups all over the world have been heavily involved in anti-nuclear protests and demonstrations for disarmament. Women have formed a large portion of protesters in England and Germany, as well as Canada. The effectiveness of these demonstrations against international policy remains to be seen, yet if enough people are involved, governments will have to pay attention. Women's interest in peace could be seen as an offshoot of maternal feminism. Military policy and participation in fighting has been primarily a male activity. Women as creators of life do not want to give birth to children who will be killed in war or who will have to live under the threat of nuclear destruction.

E. Recent Changes in the Status of Women

In 1984, four of the 22 new Senators appointed were women. In the Conservatives' new Cabinet six of 40 members are women, a record for Canada. The proportion of women MPs has also increased considerably in the past few years. From 1920 to 1970, only 0.8% of MPs in Ottawa were female. By 1979, this had changed to 4.6%.⁽¹⁾ After the 1984 election, the figure had risen to 9%.⁽²⁾ The last 15 years has shown a dramatic change in the number of women elected to Parliament.

Canadian women's status has changed in other respects as well. For example, labour force participation has increased for women

(1) Kathryn Kopinak, "Polity" in Sociology, edited by R. Hagedorn, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980, p. 445.

(2) John Terry, "The Gender Gap: Women's Political Power" (CIR 84-17E), Research Branch, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 15 October 1984.

25 to 34 years from 45% in 1971 to 66% in 1981.⁽¹⁾ The proportion of university and college students who are female has increased dramatically. In 1971, 38% of full-time undergraduate university students were female,⁽²⁾ while in 1982-83, this figure increased to 47%.⁽³⁾ Especially in medicine, law, veterinary medicine and pharmacy, the proportion of female students has increased from 1972-73 to 1982-83 as Table 1 shows.

Table 1

Percent Female Enrolment in Selected University Courses, Canada,
1972-73 and 1982-83⁽⁴⁾

	<u>1972-73</u>	<u>1982-83</u>
Medicine	23%	40%
Law	18%	42%
Veterinary Medicine	19%	51%
Pharmacy	54%	65%

These three measures of women's status, election to political office, labour force participation and enrolment in higher education indicate that Canadian women have made considerable gains in the past decade.

CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Through a concerted lobby, demonstrations, publications, and the provision of services for women, the movement for women's equality has made an impact on social policy, legal change and public attitudes.

(1) Boulet, J.A. and L. Lavallée, The Changing Economic Status of Women, Ottawa, Economic Council of Canada, 1984, p. 7.

(2) Statistics Canada, Perspectives Canada III, Ottawa, 1980, p. 79.

(3) Statistics Canada, Education in Canada, A Statistical Review for 1982-83, Ottawa, p. 114.

(4) Ibid., p. 60 for 1982-83 figures; Boulet, p.30 for 1972-73.

It is no longer socially acceptable to blatantly discriminate against women on the job, in obtaining accommodation, or in any public place. But despite official policies and legal equality, women's status has a long way to go to reach equality with that of men.

Institutional and personal behaviour often lag behind official policy. A marked division of labour within the home still orients women's time and energy away from public life. Shortage of child care facilities, less than adequate maternity benefits and a segregated labour force with lower pay for "women's work" all contribute to inequality. The feminist lobby to change government policy is often counteracted by other interests. The economic recession and priority given to business interests make it difficult to enforce such changes as equal pay for work of equal value or to expand child care facilities.

However, apart from any political movement, economic changes in themselves have led to an expansion of women's role in society. The demand for labour during the 1860s, the 1940s and 1960s pulled many women into the workforce. Rising costs of housing and childrearing have encouraged many more women to work for pay in recent years. Greater economic independence has led to increased personal confidence and power, and keeping a higher public profile has increased women's political power.

But working for pay certainly doesn't make a woman a feminist. She may still maintain segregated roles in the home and give priority to her husband's job and well-being. She may continue to abide by fashions in femininity, and actually try to discourage other women from achieving equality. Yet if she works alongside men and earns their respect and her own money, she is more likely to be given a say in the way money is spent at home. She is more able to live on her own if she chooses to and therefore will probably be less willing to tolerate unfair treatment. With greater education and with more women earning their own money, it is difficult for them to accept a secondary position in society. These factors therefore encourage women to embrace feminist ideas.

Since the early days of women's rights in the 19th century, it has been the more educated, professional women who have been most likely to promote change in women's status. After all, in some ways they stand to

gain the most from equality with men in a world which emphasizes property, income and status. But 19th and early 20th century feminism has often been referred to as "maternal feminism" because it came to focus on the importance of women as mothers, childrearers and as people concerned with the needs of the less fortunate. They extended the realm of motherly responsibility to social service, and used it as a starting point for reform. In contrast, most members of the recent phase of the movement have not argued that women's contribution is unique but rather that all sexual stereotypes and discrimination should be eliminated.⁽¹⁾

In recent years, the more radical socialist elements of the women's movement seemed to have gained far less support and public sympathy than advocates of liberal feminism. Socialist feminists have been active in union organizing, anti-nuclear and cruise missile demonstrations, the abortion clinic controversy, gay rights, working with liberation groups from other countries (i.e., Poland and Central America) and providing feminist services (i.e., abortion counselling, rape crisis centres and transition houses). Although women's magazines and political parties have been showing increased interest in feminist issues, they have seldom made any link between feminism and socialism.

While equality for women was the goal of both phases of the women's movement, focusing on the vote and arguing that women were different to men in their social contribution eventually led away from the more radical issues. Since the second phase of the movement could build upon the gains of the first, greater legal equality has been achieved in the last two decades. Yet despite changes in the law which says that women have equal opportunities in education and work and equal legal and civil rights,⁽²⁾ there is much evidence to indicate that this is not so in practice. Child care and housework are still seen as women's responsibilities, and these duties interfere with employment promotion. Women workers earn only

(1) Wayne Roberts, "Rocking the Cradle for the World: The New Woman and Maternal Feminism, Toronto, 1877-1914," in Kealey, 1979, p. 15-45.

(2) Except for Native women, who still lose their treaty rights if they marry a non-status Indian.

two-thirds of men workers. Lack of confidence and lack of assertiveness are still more common for women than for men. Girls and boys are still making stereotyped occupational choices. And governments and boardrooms are still dominated by men. Clearly the fight for equality is more difficult when financial resources are scarce and reform is viewed as too expensive. Women can only hope that the recession of the 1980s will not place them back in the spirit of the 1930s when scarce resources were strongly contested and women's voice was not always heard. However this is unlikely to happen as women will not easily relinquish the rights they have won over the past 50 years.

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• INDICATES
75% RECYCLED
25% POST-
CONSUMER FIBRE



• SIGNIFIE 75 %
FIBRES RECYCLÉES,
25 % DÉCHETS DE
CONSOMMATION

BALANCE OF PRODUCTS
25% RECYCLED

AUTRES PRODUITS:
25 % FIBRES RECYCLÉES

